

Rabies

Fact Sheet



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Maine Center for Disease
Control and Prevention

An Office of the
Department of Health and Human Services

Mary C. Mayhew, Commissioner

What is rabies?

Rabies is a disease that affects the brain and spinal cord and is caused by a virus. It is almost always fatal. Rabies in humans is very rare in the United States, but rabies in animals – mainly wildlife – is common in most parts of the country as well as Maine.

What are signs and symptoms of rabies?

In humans, it may take many weeks or even a few years for people to show signs of rabies after being infected. Most often people start showing signs of the disease 1 to 3 months after the virus infects them. Early signs of rabies may include fever or headache, but this changes quickly to nervous system signs, such as unclear thinking, sleepiness, or worry. Once someone with rabies infection starts showing signs, they usually die. This is why it is very important to talk to your doctor or healthcare provider right away if you are bitten by any animal, especially a wild animal.

Animals with rabies usually act strangely once the virus gets to their brain, but signs vary. Some animals may seem shy and fearful while others become mean. Some rabid animals stumble as though drunk, seem lame, or seem very friendly. Because not all rabid animals behave strangely, avoid contact with all wild animals – especially bats, skunks, foxes, and raccoons.

How is rabies spread?

The rabies virus lives in the saliva (spit) and brain and spinal cord of infected animals. Rabies is spread when infected animals bite or scratch another animal or human. The virus can also be spread if saliva or tissue from the brain or spinal cord touches broken skin or gets into the mouth, nose or eyes. These are called rabies exposures. Rabies is not spread by petting a rabid animal or touching dried saliva, blood, urine, or feces from a rabid animal.

Is there a test to tell if an animal has rabies?

The state public health laboratory in Augusta tests the brain tissue of animals that are thought to have rabies that have exposed a human or domestic animal (pet).

What kind of animals spread rabies?

Rabies can infect any mammal, but is most common among certain animals like bats, skunks, foxes, and raccoons. Rabies is very rare among small rodents like squirrels, rats, mice, and chipmunks. Rabies is rare in vaccinated pets and farm animals. It is important to make sure that all pets and farm animals stay up to date with their rabies shots to prevent them from getting rabies and spreading it to their owners or other animals.

How common is rabies in Maine?

Animal rabies is found regularly among wild animals and sometimes among unvaccinated pets and farm animals in Maine. The most common animals found to be rabid include raccoons, skunks, foxes, and bats. Rabid animals have been identified in every Maine county.

What should you do if you think that you have been exposed to rabies?

If you think you have been exposed to a wild animal or pet that you do not know, follow the steps below to prevent rabies:

1. Wash the wound with soap and water right away, and continue washing for at least 10 minutes.
2. Call your doctor or healthcare provider as soon as you finish washing the wound. They will help you decide if you need to be treated for rabies. Maine CDC can help to assess rabies exposures and the need for animal testing and rabies shots.
3. Contact your town's Animal Control Officer (ACO) if the animal you think might have rabies is a pet. Contact your local Game Warden if the suspect animal is wild. If the animal is available it will be decided if testing or watching is needed.
4. If your pet is bitten or scratched by an animal that you think might be rabid, notify your veterinarian and the town's ACO or Game Warden as stated above.

What is the treatment for people exposed to rabies?

Treatment for people exposed to rabies is a combination of vaccine and immunoglobulin shots. This is called "post-exposure prophylaxis". If the animal has been caught and can either be watched or tested for rabies, some doctors will wait until the test results come back to decide if treatment is needed.

- An unvaccinated person should get 4 doses of rabies vaccine – one dose right away, along with another shot called Rabies Immune Globulin (RIG), and 3 more doses of vaccine on the 3rd, 7th, and 14th days after the first shot is given.
- A person who got pre-exposure vaccine should get 2 doses of rabies vaccine – one dose right away and one 3 days later; no RIG is needed.
- A person who has a weakened immune system should receive 5 doses of rabies vaccine – one dose right away, along with RIG, and 4 more doses on the 3rd, 7th, 14th, and 28th days after the first shot is given.

How can you prevent rabies?

- Be a good pet owner. Make sure your pets are vaccinated against rabies. By law, all dogs and cats must be vaccinated.
- Avoid contact with all wild animals. Avoid any animal – wild, farm, or pet – that you do not know. If you plan to have contact with wild animals, for your job or when hunting, wear protective gloves.
- Don't let wild animals "share your lunch". Fasten trashcan lids tightly. Garbage attracts animals like skunks and raccoons.
- Teach your children to keep a safe distance from wild animals and all other animals they don't know. Enjoy all wild animals from a distance, even if they seem friendly. A rabid animal sometimes acts tame.
- Keep pets on your property, on a leash or better yet, in a fenced in area to lessen the chances of them contacting a wild animal. It is against the law to allow your dog to roam free.
- It is against the law to keep wild animals such as skunks or raccoons as pets. You must have a license to keep wild or exotic animals as pets.
- Talk to a trained exterminator or contractor about "bat-proofing" your home.

- Do not handle sick or hurt wild animals yourself; call your Animal Control Officer. If you must touch a dead animal, use heavy gloves, sticks, or other tools to avoid direct contact with the animal.
- Animal Control Officers, veterinarians and their assistants, and others who have a lot of contact with stray animals or wildlife, should think about getting the pre-exposure rabies vaccine.

Where can I get more information?

For more information, contact Maine CDC by calling 1-800-821-5821 or visiting the website <http://www.mainepublichealth.gov/rabies>. The U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention website - <http://www.cdc.gov/rabies> – is another excellent source of health information.

Important Telephone Numbers

Maine CDC Disease Reporting and Consultation

(800) 821-5821 TTY (800) 606-0215

Health and Environmental Testing Laboratory

(207) 287-2727

State Veterinarian

(207) 287-3701

State Police (Nights and Weekends)

Augusta (800) 452-4664

Gray (800) 482-0730

Houlton (800) 924-2261

Orono (800) 432-7381

Game Warden Service (Weekdays)

Ashland (207) 435-3231

Bangor (207) 941-4440

Gray (207) 657-2345

Greenville (207) 695-3756

Sidney (207) 547-5300